

TV News Anchors AND Journalistic Tradition

How Journalists Adapt to Technology



KIMBERLY MELTZER

Through the lens of TV news anchors, this book examines the impact that television news has had on traditional journalistic standards and practices. While TV news anchors boost the power, adulation, and authority of journalism in general, internally, the journalistic community feels that anchors undermine many key journalistic values. This book provides a historical overview of the impact they have had on American journalism, uncovering the changing values, codes of behavior, and boundaries of the journalistic community. In doing so, it reveals that challenges to journalistic standards provide an opportunity to engage in debate that is central to maintaining journalism's identity, and demonstrate the ability of the community to self-regulate. The result is that news anchors are kept in check by the community, and the community is prompted to reexamine itself and evolve. The book's findings also offer suggestions for thinking about how journalists are dealing with the latest technological challenges posed by the internet and mobile technology.

"As news networks proliferate and an array of newcomers move onto the stage of evening television news, Kimberly Meltzer offers a timely and thoughtful assessment of the rise of the anchor, from Edward R. Murrow to Katie Couric. Meltzer examines the anomalous nature of these figures, who remain the most visible symbols of American journalism even as their celebrity status and often emotional personas contradict the ideals of that profession. Meltzer then relays industry insiders' own views of the field, as they search for a new kind of relevance in the landscape of 21st-century journalism."—Carolyn Kitch, *Professor of Journalism; Director, Doctoral Program in Mass Media & Communication, Temple University; author of Pages from the Past: History and Memory in American Magazines*

"Kimberly Meltzer offers a thorough and dispassionate explanation of how television journalism has emerged over the past fifty years as a formation that challenges, accepts, alters, and disdains newspaper conventions. In her capable hands, our obsession with television anchors—that is, the controversy and contention over anchors' displays of emotion, appearance, and personality—finally begins to make sense. Without sugarcoating the downsides but also acknowledging the technological inevitability of television's adaption of journalistic rules, she traces the emergence of the anchor's "signature." Drawing on her own experience as well as rich interview material, Meltzer explains just why we are so interested in Katie, Dan, and Tom—and quite literally, their bodies—and why this is likely to continue." —Linda Steiner, *Professor and Director of Research and Doctoral Studies, Philip Merrill College of Journalism, University of Maryland, College Park*



Kimberly Meltzer, Ph.D., is a Visiting Assistant Professor at Georgetown University in the graduate program in Communication, Culture & Technology.

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Library of Congress Cataloging-in-Publication Data

Meltzer, Kimberly.

TV news anchors and journalistic tradition: how journalists
adapt to technology / Kimberly Meltzer.

p. cm.

Includes bibliographical references and index.

1. Television journalists—United States.
2. Television broadcasting of news—United States. I. Title.
PN4784.T4M45 070.1'95—dc22 2009046845
ISBN 978-1-4539-0115-1

Bibliographic information published by **Die Deutsche Nationalbibliothek**.

Die Deutsche Nationalbibliothek lists this publication in the “Deutsche
Nationalbibliografie”; detailed bibliographic data is available
on the Internet at <http://dnb.d-nb.de/>.

Cover image: CBS “Evening News” anchor Katie Couric, NBC “Nightly News”
anchor Brian Williams, left, and ABC “World News” anchor Charles Gibson
are interviewed on the NBC “Today” show in New York Wednesday May 28, 2008.
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www.peterlang.com

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Printed in the United States of America

To my family

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Preface

The merger of television and journalism is a struggle that has raged for over five decades between the journalistic community and its traditional standards, practices and values and the novel elements that television has introduced into journalistic practice. At present, this struggle rests in a stalemate. Neither television journalists and executives nor the larger journalistic community of which they are a part will concede their ground. This book traces the parameters of that struggle as seen through the lens of TV anchors over the half a century that it has been waged. It argues that while many of the features of television journalism are the cause of resentment and disapproval by the greater journalistic community, the positive aspects of these features and the opportunities they afford for journalistic authority and attention are cause for them to be tolerated by the larger community. Through this arrangement, the relationship between TV journalism and the journalistic community, while tense, is sustained.

If we believe that journalism is instrumental in a democracy which values an informed citizenry, diversity of opinions, and checks on leaders and power, then it follows that it is important to know how this essential institution functions. In the United States, the processes which govern the development and maintenance of journalistic norms and practices are largely internal. It is only by peering into this internal realm that we can fully understand the inner workings of the field and its practitioners, and how they are influenced by, and themselves influence, outside forces.

Acknowledgments

At The Annenberg School for Communication at the University of Pennsylvania, I would like to thank Barbie Zelizer for her wisdom, vision and direction on the project which became this book. Along with Barbie, I would also like to thank my esteemed advisors, Michael Delli Carpini and Elihu Katz, for shepherding me through to the completion of this project. Thank you also to the entire ASC faculty and staff, past and present, including Beverly Henry, Karen Short, Julie Sheehan, Donna Burdumy, Regina Medlock, Carmen Renwick, Lizz Cooper, Kyle Cassidy, Aaron Simmons, Suzanne Faubl, Deb Porter, Rich Cardona, Sharon Black, and Mirka Cortes. Thank you to my classmates and friends.

I have eternal love and gratitude for my wonderfully supportive family. A special thank you to my brother, Jason, for providing valuable advice.

In the Communication, Culture and Technology program at Georgetown University, thank you especially to Michael Macovski and Diana Owen for their guidance on aspects of the book publishing process, and all of my CCT colleagues for their encouragement.

At Peter Lang Publishing, thank you to my editor, Mary Savigar, Sophie Appel and the production staff, and reviewers of the manuscript. I am so pleased to see this book come to fruition in your capable hands.

Chapter 1

Introduction

This book has been a long time in the making. The seeds of interest in understanding the network television news anchor phenomenon were planted well before I began my graduate studies. When a 22-year-old who has visited New York City only a handful of times lands her first job out of college as Katie Couric's assistant at the *Today* show in Rockefeller Center, the experience makes a lasting impression—one so strong that it sticks with her in academe until she eventually finds a way to turn it into a scholarly endeavor. After working closely with other anchors, I observed that while the job entailed some of what I thought of as “real” journalism, it also entailed many things that, to me, were not.

Thus it was by an uncanny coincidence that the realization of this project coincided with a period of unparalleled upheaval in network television news. Upheaval took place on all possible fronts: heralding the transition into the third generation of the network nightly news anchors, a flurry of press surrounded Brian Williams' replacement of Tom Brokaw at the helm of NBC's *Nightly News*. For the better part of a year (2005–2006), speculation abounded as to what long-term shape CBS *Evening News* would take, such as the possibility of CBS experimenting with a multi-anchor or rotating anchor format on the evening news (Carter & Steinberg, 2005), until veteran newsman Bob Schieffer succeeded Dan Rather on an interim basis before Katie Couric was named as a permanent replacement in April 2006. Prior to that, commentators believed that “the marquee matchup” would remain between Brian Williams and Peter Jennings (Steinberg, 2005d). However, with Jennings's passing from lung cancer, ABC scrambled to find a successor and emerged with not one anchor but two. Young and attractive, Elizabeth Vargas and Bob Woodruff were paired to anchor ABC's *World News Tonight*. However, less than six months after the pairing, with Woodruff recovering from serious injuries sustained while on assignment in Iraq and Vargas preparing for maternity leave, ABC named Charles Gibson the sole anchor of its evening newscast. In the same year, Ted Koppel departed ABC *Nightline* in December 2005 (Steinberg, 2005), and since

signed on as a columnist for the *New York Times*, an editor for The Discovery Channel and a contributor to National Public Radio. In March 2006, Mike Wallace announced his retirement from *60 Minutes*, and Anderson Cooper replaced Aaron Brown on CNN. By early 2008, after less than 2 years in the post, Katie Couric's departure from the failing *CBS Evening News* was considered "imminent." Dozens of magazine covers, newspaper front pages and television programs bellowed each announcement. These announcements in turn, sparked an outpouring of journalistic discourse that asked what it all meant and then debated the possibilities offered. In sum, 2005–2006 was a period teeming with changes in the network television news landscape.

For a researcher of this timely topic, the ongoing announcements of new developments and deafening hubbub about the anchor changes were a mixed blessing. While they affirmed my belief in the importance of studying television anchors as a phenomenon that is very much alive in contemporary discourse, they instilled a fear faced by any researcher of a subject that is continuously unfolding and in flux: How do we keep up? How can we make the research current and definitive when there is no end point? But then, in the course of my research, I realized that discourse on TV anchors is as old as their existence, and it manifests itself in patterned ways around central themes. I also realized that the discursive patterns associated with community maintenance and change are relevant to the journalistic community in reference to a wide array of subjects beyond the negotiation of community boundaries. And after much thought and toil, it became clear that what I sought to accomplish in my project was not a running record of the day-to-day goings-on in television journalism but answers to much broader and enduring questions. Why do television news anchors cause such a stir? Perhaps they capture so much attention because they are vested with a special and powerful role in American democratic society—they keep us informed. But if this were the key reason, why wouldn't print and radio journalists command equal attention? Maybe the reason television news anchors receive so much coverage in the media is that they are easily accessible to the public. One does not have to be an expert or an insider to feel qualified to read, understand and talk about the goings-on of anchors. I discovered this as soon as I began to tell friends and acquaintances about my project. Ordinary viewers who simply *watch* a television newscast come to feel as though they *know* the people who tell them the news. So the press

writes about anchors for the public interest, and network TV anchors are among the few journalists who are known to the public on a national scale. But beyond piquing the public interest, the media have a second, at least as important, audience for whom they cover anchors. It is an audience of peers—fellow journalists and others within the field. This is where the real dialogue about television journalism takes place. It is in discussions with the audience of fellow journalists that the interesting “dirty laundry” of the community is revealed. It is through this dialogue that it is possible to search for answers to the question: Why and how has the journalistic community coped with the complexities that the advent of television brought to journalists’ jobs over the past fifty years? This is what all of the talk about anchors is really about: the community of journalists trying to deal with a complicated partner.

The Subject of Study

Throughout the evolution of journalism, members of the American journalistic community have developed ways of dealing with changes in the work environment by discursively articulating and negotiating the boundaries, norms and values of the profession in the face of these changes. While many types of changes occur, the journalistic community’s adaptation to technology is particularly important because it shapes the form that the news product takes and the routines and practices that journalists develop to create that product. New technology presents opportunities and challenges to journalists: they must find ways to transform their craft to accommodate the new medium but also incorporate and preserve the community’s existing identity, values and function.

Journalism’s adaptation to television fundamentally changed the nature and shape of journalistic work. Television changed the way that news is produced, received and regarded. It privileges visual imagery and marks a change in the relationships between journalists and their audiences, the media industries in which they work, and their fellow journalists. At the same time, the journalistic community has clung to principles and practices from earlier forms of journalism—print and radio. The journalistic community has never fully come to terms with the elements that television introduced into the journalist’s job, and the community has haggled back and forth over the elements that constitute journalism in the fifty-odd years of the television era. This struggle between old and new has been compounded by

the added competition from new news organizations, other advances in technology, and a changing cultural and political landscape in the United States and the world.

This book is about the elements of the television journalist's job that are unsettled within the American journalistic community and with which the community continues to grapple. Although some aspects commonly associated with the TV journalist, such as fame and heightened emotionalism, were already present to a lesser extent in previous forms of journalism, their amplification by the television medium has made them more obvious, and in turn, has brought them to the forefront of journalistic debate. Other elements such as a journalist's appearance became central to the journalist's job through the visual imagery of television, marking a departure from the attributes commonly associated with journalists more generally. These attributes have had far-reaching effects on many aspects of journalistic practice, and this book traces their reception and evolution as part of journalism. Of all those practicing journalism in the television era, the struggle between the time-honored principles of print and radio journalism and these new elements introduced by television is experienced to the greatest degree by the TV news anchors themselves. The television news anchor embodies the effect of television technology on journalism through traits associated with his or her visual presence, qualities related to personalization, and other aspects of a particular kind of relay of news to audiences. The melding of television technology and journalism, as seen in the form of the anchor on TV news, has rendered the anchor a useful type of journalist for addressing the shape of journalism more broadly. This is an important moment to consider, for when it comes to anchors, the journalistic community is schizophrenic; externally, it uses anchors for community promotion and reaps the positive benefits of power, adulation and affirmation of authority that anchors afford. But internally, the community feels that anchors undermine many key journalistic values. This book uses the anchor as a lens through which to examine the journalistic community's struggle brought on by the wedding of journalism and television technology. The discussions surrounding the anchors are important because they both reflect internally on the practice itself as well as externally on the journalistic community at large, and in this way they signal the broader shape of professional and technological adaptation among journalists.

The Interpretive Community Framework

My approach to this study follows from a particular notion of how American journalists are tied together as a collective through which they discursively negotiate, articulate and reassert their identity and authority as tellers of news. Some scholars have looked at journalists through the prisms of formal organizations (Weber, 1947; Blau & Scott, 1962; Born, 2004; Epstein, 1973). Others have examined them as professions (Freidson, 1984; Becker et al., 1987; Henningham, 1985). Still others have used the lens of occupations to consider journalistic work (White, 1950; Breed, 1955; Tuchman, 1972; Gans, 1979; Fishman, 1980; Tunstall, 1971; Klaidman & Beauchamp, 1987; Weaver & Wilhoit, 1986; Underwood & Stamm, 2001).¹ In each case, scholars have used the various prisms to address how journalists maintain their collective autonomy and authority through self-evaluation, adaptation and self-control against changing external circumstances.

While the different conceptualizations of journalists as formal organizations, professions and occupations may partly capture the nature of the journalistic collective, each falls short on some account. While journalists do behave like formal organizations by developing and voluntarily obeying procedures of conduct, there are no official rules or designs of a formal organization from which these procedures are derived (that is, except for government regulation which is external to the organization). What is missing from the formal organizations framework is the fact that the journalistic collective establishes and follows norms and practices precisely because of its lack of a recognized governing, rule-making body, and its need for legitimacy. The characterization of journalism as a profession is similarly flawed. Journalism does not seem to fit the professional framework's emphases on training, education and credentialing. The professional framework also ignores the relevance of journalistic discourse in determining what members of the journalistic community do and restricts our understanding of journalistic practice to those aspects of journalism emphasized by its particular view. Journalism has been characterized as a service-oriented field with a certain amount of independence and a mission to serve its "clients" who are thought to be the American public (Gans, 2003; The Project for Excellence in Journalism, 2004), but these characteristics are

1. For a detailed account of how scholars have talked about journalism, see Zelizer, 2004: 32-42.

not sufficient to achieve professional status. While “professionalizing” journalism may serve to lend status to the journalistic community and give its members a sense of control over their work, offsetting “the dangers inherent in the subjectivity of reporting,” the professional and occupational frameworks neglect to recognize the means by which reporters arrive at shared constructions of reality, informally network and depend on narrative and storytelling practices (Zelizer, 1993a: 220). This is especially important in the collective of broadcast journalists and other journalists using new technologies for whom the professional ideals and norms that were originally developed in terms of print journalism must be adapted.

Rather than conceptualizing a community as a profession, Zelizer (1993a) borrows from anthropology, folklore and literary studies in suggesting that a more fruitful way to conceptualize some groups may be as interpretive communities, “united through...shared discourse and collective interpretations of key public events” (19) that help members determine what is appropriate practice. Although these organizations may be bureaucratic or corporate by typology, their members still behave as folkloric communities that use their own talk about themselves to keep themselves in line.

This study follows Zelizer’s lead in viewing journalists as interpretive communities. Viewing journalists as an interpretive community brings the lens closest to journalists’ own conceptions of themselves in the examination of the journalistic collective and looks at journalists in terms of what they actually do and how they talk about it. Interpretive communities are characterized by common modes of interpretation of their social worlds. Interpretive communities act as cultural sites where meanings are constructed, shared, and reconstructed by members of social groups in the course of everyday life (Berkowitz & TerKuerst, 1999). Similar to other studies (Meyers, 2003; Berkowitz & TerKuerst, 1999; Berkowitz, 2000; Kitch, 2003; Cecil, 2002; Brewin, 1999; Lindlof, 1988; Fish, 1980)² that have employed the interpretive community framework, this study explores the ways in which journalists have understood and articulated their professional and social roles over the years through stories that they tell about their own work, its significance, and its relevance to larger cultural and social narratives. At the heart of such stories is an ongoing process of

2. Although the idea of interpretive communities was originally developed in reference to audience groups and consumers (Fish, 1980; Lindlof, 1988), it has since been applied to other types of groups including producers of cultural products such as news.

establishing and maintaining the collective.³ As Schudson (1982: 111) wrote, the talk of journalists is a critical process of consensus formation. “The group becomes a brotherhood that influences and colors, beyond any individual resistance to prejudice or individual devotion to fact, all of what [journalists] write.”

I found the interpretive community framework most useful in thinking about how notions of appropriate characteristics and behaviors of TV journalists are batted around through mediated journalistic discourse. Journalists are an example of an interpretive community formed in conjunction with, and continuously adapting to, communication technologies in the environments in which they work. TV news anchors in particular are a product of journalistic adaptation to the television medium. In that the modes of adaptation were not forced on the journalistic community by mandate, members of the community developed ways of dealing with new environments through informal discussions. In this way, journalists’ discussions of changing practice help shape the format and content of journalistic output.

For this reason, this book tracks existing discussions about journalism, and specifically about anchors, to uncover what they reveal about the changing values, codes of behavior and boundaries of the journalistic community. This is accomplished primarily by examining written materials from the popular press and trade press, scholarly literature,⁴ memoirs, network archives, organizational proceedings, and intermittent broadcasts

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3. Other work has been done on the news media’s self-criticism, but it is not talked about in the context or framework of interpretive community discussion that discursively maintains and reasserts norms and boundaries. Instead it is discussed as “self-reflexive news media reporting” (Haas, 2006: 351; Bishop, 2001: 23), “journalistic metacoverage” (Haas, 2006: 352), or “boundary work” and “self-coverage” (Bishop, 1999; 2001). Bishop (2001: 23) suggests that journalistic self-examination is a kind of ritual sacrifice, performed in the hope that it persuades the audience to regain its faith in journalism and to sustain ratings and readership. This supports Zelizer’s (1997: 17) contention that journalistic self-reflection is also designed to deflect potential external criticism and distrust.
 4. Scholarly accounts and critiques of television news, anchors, and journalism more generally, constitute another sort of meta-discourse about journalism. While some of these scholars themselves are not actual journalists, their meta-discourse is part of the larger discussion through which the journalistic community self-monitors. As such, it provides added context and critical and often historical perspectives that other journalistic accounts lack.

themselves from the 1950s onward. A sample of the discourse on anchors from each decade was examined until a “saturation” point was reached (Glaser & Strauss, 1967). Appendix 1 provides information on how the sample was constructed. All of this is tracked as well through interviews with journalists and other employees of media organizations. A listing of all personal interview information can also be found in Appendix 2. In total, over 900 articles, transcripts, books and broadcasts were examined.

It is important to note that in referring to the 55 years of ongoing discussions from which I sample, I widely construe the meaning of “internal conversations” among members of the journalistic community as the following: while one media columnist or reporter who covers the media beat, writing about anchors or TV news, may not be directing his written speech toward a particular person, a conversation can still be said to be taking place more broadly to which this individual media writer is contributing. The fact that this is a journalist him- or herself using a forum such as a newspaper or trade publication to critique, praise, or question a practice or event means that this media writer, as a member of the journalistic community himself, is engaging in a dialogue about the craft with other community members—the internal audience—and the public—the external audience. So while this may not be a conversation in the sense of speaking face to face, or one on one, it certainly is still a conversation. The archival research mostly from print publications is used to this end, to demonstrate that this type of community discussion through the venues I have delineated has been ongoing since the beginning of TV news in the 1950s. In this sense, this book directly engages in analyzing a “conversation” that has taken place among journalists.

The question of how to adapt to technology has been around since the inception of journalism, but its relevance to the evolution of television technology is commonly dated to 1941 (Barnouw, 1975). The fact that twenty years later, in the early sixties, the stature of television news was still being debated (Zelizer, 1992) and continues to be debated today more than sixty years after its advent, is evidence of how ongoing discussions about adaptation really are. According to Zelizer (1992), though print was still viewed as superior to television, by July 1964, the summer following Kennedy’s assassination, “television journalism had emerged as a powerful force in American life and politics” (28), and “[b]y the late sixties, television had come of age as the preferred medium for news” (29). Journalistic discussions about technological advances and institutional changes worked to

bring about these changes. By most accounts, television journalism reached its pinnacle in the eighties, as measured by audience levels never before reached and unmatched ever since. Subsequently, a quickly changing technological and cultural landscape that outpaced the journalistic community's speed at which it could adjust, led up to its recent state of public unrest.

Carey (2000) argues for the importance of understanding journalism as "independent of, or at least orthogonal to, technology" (129), although he grants that the full development of journalism was technologically dependent. Journalism, he writes, is a historically situated social practice rather than a machine or a medium or a publisher or a business organization. It is an evolving practice and a cultural act. "Journalism is a peculiar way of using these technologies rather than the technologies themselves" (130). Technologies are means or instruments with which journalism is practiced. Although discussions within the interpretive community of journalists date more broadly than just to television, having originated in the days of print, fifty years ago, discussions within the interpretive community of journalists began to shape the ways in which journalists adapted their craft to the television medium and made use of the new technology. Ever since then, the community has continued to debate, praise and critique the ways that television journalism works.

Some scholars have set out to investigate whether changes in technology influence changes in other journalistic practices, such as the reliance on, or inclusion of, official sources in event-driven news stories (Livingston & Bennett, 2003) or whether the application of technology in news organizations leads to a lowering of the quality of content (Ursell, 2001). In some cases, these studies find that even with new use of technology, other journalistic practices do not change. In other cases, while there may be consequences of the technology, these consequences are not due to technological innovation alone but rather innovation as mediated by the political-institutional role allocated to organizations, their economic and organizational characteristics, their corporate aims (Ursell, 2001), and discussions among journalists in the community.

So in the examination of journalism's adaptation to television technology, one must consider the mediating forces within a particular journalism organization as well as across television news organizations: "While it is true that a new technology can condition politics and society, a